

Bhagavathi Paattu of the Mannaans

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Mannaan is a community belonging to the Harijan section in Kerala. Their main jobs are laundering and acting as 'priests' in the worship of Bhagavathi and some minor deities. While they are washermen of the lower castes, for clothes that are ritually unclean (after women's menses, after childbirth, and after death), the Mannathi (female of the Mannaan) has to wash them even for the highest castes like Nambutiris; only then will such clothes become ritually pure.

Velan and Perumannaan are two castes allied to the Mannaans. The Mannaans draw powder pictures (Kalam) representing Kali or Bhagavathi and some minor deities like Kutti-chathan, Mundiyan, etc., do puja to the deity invoked in the Kalam, and sing songs in praise of them (Thorram Paattu). They can hardly be called songs, only a few notes are used, and it may be more appropriate to term them as chants. They are however strong in rhythm. Mundiyan Paattu is performed for the welfare of cattle and agricultural activities. Strangely, one portion of the Mundiyan Paattu describes the building of Koothambalam (temple theatre) for the performance of Koothu and Kootiyattam.

According to their myth, Chathan is the son born to Lord Siva in a tribal women. As Chathan is said to be diminutive in size, he is referred to as Kutti-chathan (Kutti, i.e. boy or small). The word 'Chathan' is also said to be derived from Saastha. This goblin-like demi-god is said to help or trouble people according to the way he is worshipped. Trichur is reputed to be a centre for Chathan worship and people irrespective of caste or religion make offerings to him. Kutti-chathan can be induced to do harm to one's enemies. Doing puja to Kutti-chathan is considered by many as equivalent to black magic. One important activity of the Mannaans is to draw powder pictures of Chathan, do puja and sing songs. As accompaniment for this, they use only some drums like Chenda, Thudi and Eazhara (a 'brum-brum' sound is heard from this when the skin is rubbed with a curved stick).

The most important priestly activity of the Mannaans is to draw designs or pictures with coloured powders representing Bhagavathi, do puja to it, and sing songs praising her and describing her exploits. These songs are called Bhagavathi Paattu. The various designs drawn have varied esoteric significance. The repertoire of these songs is pretty large, and it will take several nights to complete one round of it. This ritual is normally done in Kaavus (grove temples) and in the houses of Eazhavas and other lower caste people. During the ritual, a person may be possessed and give oracular predictions. During the puja they may make offerings of arrack (liquor) and blood (by cutting the neck of a cock and spilling a few drops of blood) as naivedya.

BHAGAVATHI PAATTU OF THE MANNAANS



The late Mannaan Oomanattil Sankunni of Trichur, a famous artist and an authority on Bhagavathi Paattu.

Drawing: Courtesy L.S. Rajagopalan

In the singing of these songs, the singers accompany themselves on a simple but quaint stringed instrument called Nandunni. Nandunni has a rectangular hollow body of wood with a tail that projects at an angle. Strings made of sisal or palm fibre are stretched over the body, tied to an iron hook at the top end and tightened to a peg at the bottom. A small wooden bridge is also provided. Five frets are fixed over the resonator. The instrument is about 4½ feet long and 6 inches wide. The resonator will be about 14 inches. The strings are strummed by a small buffalo-horn plectrum. One string is slightly thicker and is used as a drone. By pressing the thinner wire on the frets, different notes can be produced. Though the five frets would remind us of the old pentatonic scale, the Mannaans produce only a couple of notes and it is used for the rhythm. It is normally held in the vertical position on the left shoulder and the left-hand fingers press on the frets and the right hand strums.

The projection of the tail at the end is at an angle. This seems to indicate that the instrument might have been developed from a harp or Yaazh (Tamil-Malayalam). This idea is strengthened in Malayalam poetry referring to these songs as Vyazhan Paattu. The word 'vyazhan' might have been used in the sense of Yaazham (pertaining to a Yaazh—as harps were called in the old language). Hence it may not be wrong to think that Nandunni is the first stage in the development of the fretted Vina from the harp.

Before beginning their songs they refer to the instrument, Nandunni, as a divine child. The Nandunni is kept on the divine lap. An approximate gist of their description is like this:

Oh Nandunni, what is your divine name,
Come my daughter,
The goddess of Kurumba,
Tell us your name and
Your greatness and sing.

The description goes on in this fashion: The Bilwa (bel) tree in the mountain is cut. It is shaped by the wind, the inside is scooped out with a chisel and its two parts are Sakthi and Siva. Various gods are installed on the body, and Bhadrakali resides in the centre. The two strings are *Anna* and *Alamba*. When strummed by the right hand with the left hand pressing on the strings, two birds sitting on the tree will chirp—oh come to see and hear it.

There is one more community in Kerala who draw Kalams of Bhagavathi and sing in her praise. They are the Kurups—a section of the Nair community. They do the ritual even in the houses of Nambutiri brahmins. They normally sing about the exploits of Bhagavathy, like the stories in *Devi Mahatmya* (Durga Saptasati), the killing of the demon Darika, etc. They also use the Nandunni. In some of the Devi temples, the Kurups sing these songs as a daily service. The Thirumandham Kunnu Devi temple in Malappuram district is a famous centre for this. These songs are called Thorram songs. The word 'thorram' is used in the sense of a picture.

Among the songs rendered by the Mannaans, one of the most lengthy is the one related to the story of the anklet. The ritual takes several days to complete. The story looks like a folk version of the famous story, *Chilambu* (anklet), dealt with in the Tamil classic

Chilappathikaram. It must be remembered that *Chilappathikaram* was written in Kerala by Ilango, a brother of the Chera emperor Chenguttuvan. *Chilappathikaram* is a celebrated classic in Tamil and contains a wealth of information on various art forms like music, dance, etc. Whether this folk version sung by the Mannaans came first or whether the classical version in *Chilappathikaram* came first is a moot point. Only the main points in the two versions are the same. Instead of Kannagi and Kovalan in the Tamil classic, the Mannaans refer to them as Deviyal (Devi goddess) and Palakan. It is composed in a mixture of songs and narratives (Paattu and Chollu-mozhi).

In the story, when the couple find that they have lost all their wealth, the divine anklet of Deviyal is taken by Palakan for sale in the Pandian capital. He is however cheated by the royal goldsmith there and accused of stealing the anklet of the queen. The Pandian king sentences Palakan to death by impaling. Deviyal sees some bad omens and goes in search of her husband. Finding him impaled she becomes possessed and destroys the Pandian king and the goldsmith. Finally, she installs the soul of Palakan in a temple as also her own soul and goes into eternal meditation.

One would be amazed at the wonderful imagery and forceful expression found in these songs sung by the Mannaans. A couple of examples are given below. Palakan goes to the capital of Pandian kingdom to sell the anklet of gold (*chilambu*) given by his wife Deviyal. As she receives no information about Palakan even after a week and as she sees some bad omens, she starts in search of her husband, seeking information from various living beings on the way.

Seeing a jackfruit tree on the way, she asks "Oh jack tree (*Plamaram*), have you seen my husband going this way? Did you hear the jingling of my anklets which he had taken for selling?" At this, a branch of the tree breaks off and falls down and latex starts trickling down from it. Seeing this the Devi remarks, "Your mind is a sorrowful and agitated, and you weep like me. You have my blessings. May you bear a lot of fruits. May the fruits be used for making curry and jackfruit *payasam* (pudding), and served to all during marriages in the neighbourhood. When you grow old, may your trunk be cut down and an idol of the goddess be made out of the heartwood and may puja be done to you daily."

Further, when Deviyal goes on her way, she comes across a cow. She asks the cow if it had seen her husband or heard the jingling of her anklet. The cow tries to butt her with its horns and stamp her with its front legs. The Devi is angered and says, "when I am agitated and sad and seek information, you are trying to attack me. May your horns and hooves get decayed and worm-infested and when you die, may a paraiya take you, suspended by your legs on a bamboo pole. May he cut open your stomach and take out your skin. May he cure it and fix it on a drum so that you get beaten up over and over again even after you die."

Another person she met on her journey was a young damsel, who was standing near a well with her friends. When the Devi enquired about her husband, the girl laughed clapping her hands and said, "Here is a woman enquiring about her husband. Does the water pot go in search of the well or does the well go in search of a water pot? Does a flower go in search

of a bee or the bee in search of the flower? It is the male who should go in search of the female. What is the world coming to that a woman goes in search of a man?"

The Devi got very angry and cursed her, "Not understanding the agony of my heart and sympathising with me, you are clapping your hands and laughing. I shall give you a 'boon'. May you get married soon. May your husband go for a hunt. May he get killed in the forest by a tiger. May his friends bring his dead body and lower it in a grave. May the Thaali (marriage badge) you wear on your neck be snatched away and placed on the face of your dead husband. And then, when you weep and cry beating your chest with those very hands that you are clapping with now, you will understand the sorrow and agony of my heart."

Can the depth of her agony be brought about in a more forceful way? Folk songs contain such a wealth of ideas and poetic expressions. The text of the entire ritual has not been printed, only a part of it has been published. The song, etc. have not been recorded in full. The highbrows who neglect such folk literature know not what they are missing.

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